

## CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

<b>Project Name:</b>	Hat Creek Ranch Improvement Request EA
<b>Proposed Implementation Date:</b>	August 2019
<b>Proponent:</b>	Hat Creek Ranch
<b>Location:</b>	Sec 36, T2S, R15W (Common Schools), Sec 11,12,13, T3S, R15W (Western/Eastern)
<b>County:</b>	Beaverhead

### I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The proposal would modify 1 mile of existing fence and will replace 8 miles of degraded wildlife unfriendly fence on DNRC State Trust Lands. The top and bottom wires of the fences will be modified to make it easier for wildlife passage to occur. Fences will be designed using Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks *Wildlife Friendly Fences* publication. The proposal will also move the fence on to the surveyed property boundary along the southern boundary of section 13. The ranch also proposes to mark 2 miles of fence near the Mud Creek sage grouse lek with vinyl markers to reduce bird collisions with the fence.

In addition, approximately 22 acres of conifer encroachment removal will take place on state land to reduce encroaching conifer trees, mainly Douglas Fir and Rock Mountain Juniper trees. The ranch will also perform some mesic streambed restoration work to help retain water in riparian areas for longer periods of time in the spring and keep uplands greener for longer in the summer by storing additional spring runoff.

This project would be a cost share project with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, (NFWF). The estimated cost of these proposed improvements is \$81,000, with Hat Creek Ranch's out of pocket expenses being approximately \$41,056 and the rest coming from matching funds from NFWF.

The work would take place in late summer and early fall of 2019.

### II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

#### 1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

*Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.*

Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks Wildlife Biologist, Craig Fager  
Beaverhead County Commissioners  
MT DNRC Archeologist, Patrick Rennie  
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation  
Hat Creek Ranch, Lessee  
NRIS Search

#### 2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

Project is located within General Sage Grouse Habitat. The ranch will need approval from the Montana Sage Grouse Conservation Program which they have applied for permission to proceed with the proposal. Any improvements approved by the DNRC will comply with all recommendations made by the Sage Grouse Conservation Program.

#### 3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

**Action Alternative:** Allow Hat Creek Ranch to complete 9 miles of fence modification and reconstruction to make fences more wildlife friendly, do 22 acres of conifer encroachment removal work, complete mesic

restoration work and allow the ranch to mark 2 miles of fence with vinyl markers to prevent sage grouse collisions with fences near the Mud Creek lek.

**No Action Alternative:** Deny Hat Creek Ranch's request to complete 9 miles of fence modification and reconstruction to make fences more wildlife friendly, do 22 acres of conifer encroachment removal work, complete mesic restoration work and allow the ranch to mark 2 miles of fence with vinyl markers to prevent sage grouse collisions with fences near the Mud Creek lek.

### III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

#### 4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:

*Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify any cumulative impacts to soils.*

**Action Alternative:** Work will be done during dry conditions only. Rutting of soils could occur during the construction phase of the fence work and mesic restoration work. There are no known unusual geologic features in the area. No long term or cumulative effects are anticipated under this alternative to soil stability or geologic features.

**No Action Alternative:** No changes to geology or soils would occur if this alternative is chosen.

#### 5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:

*Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify cumulative effects to water resources.*

**Action Alternative:** No perennial streams are located within the proposed project area. The proposal would not impact surface or ground water resources, and no impacts to ambient water quality standards would be anticipated under this alternative. The mesic restoration work will allow the uplands to receive and store spring runoff for longer periods in the spring. This will allow grasses, shrubs and forbs to stay green later into the summer improving wildlife and livestock use of these areas.

**No Action Alternative:** No changes to water quality, quantity, and distribution would occur under the no action alternative.

#### 6. AIR QUALITY:

*What pollutants or particulate would be produced? Identify air quality regulations or zones (e.g. Class I air shed) the project would influence. Identify cumulative effects to air quality.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will impact air quality standards in the Wisdom, Montana area. The area is lightly populated and is not in a class I airshed or non-attainment zone.

#### 7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:

*What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify cumulative effects to vegetation.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will have significant changes or cause any long term or cumulative effects to the vegetation cover, quality, or quantity in the proposed project area. Some ground disturbance of vegetation

will occur during any portion of the action alternative, but no long-term impacts would be expected. Under the no action no changes to vegetative cover would occur.

#### **8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:**

*Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.*

**Action Alternative:** A variety of big game, small mammals, reptiles, raptors, upland game birds and songbirds use this area and activities from the proposed project could temporarily disrupt wildlife movement and patterns. The proposed activities under this alternative will remove, re-construct, or construct new wildlife friendly fences to enhance wildlife travel and migration corridors through the ranches deeded property as well as the ranches leased state lands.

The fences currently make it difficult for Pronghorn migration through the ranch and make it difficult for elk and deer during the spring and fall of the year to get through the fenced areas, especially young calf's. There are approximately 1,500 antelope that migrate approximately 70 miles between summer and winter range in this area that need to cross numerous fences. The project will help that migration in this area with wildlife friendly fences in place.

The project will also enhance sage grouse habitat in three ways by improving 2 mesic areas, removing some conifer encroachment and marking the top two wires on fences located along the two miles of fence near the Mud Lake lek with vinyl reflective markers.

**No Action Alternative;** All fences will remain wildlife unfriendly and no sage grouse enhancement work will occur under this alternative.

#### **9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:**

*Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.*

The proposal is located within the Greater Sage-Grouse general habitat area boundaries defined by the Executive Order (EO) for the implementation of the Montana Sage Grouse Conservation Strategy. This project is currently being evaluated by the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program and is waiting for approval from the program before being allowed to proceed under the action alternative. There is an active lek identified within ½ mile of the existing fence in Section 36, T2S R15W. There are no other leks identified in the project area.

#### **10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:**

*Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.*

A Class I (literature review) level review was conducted by the DNRC staff archaeologist for the area of potential effect (APE). This entailed inspection of project maps, DNRC's sites/site leads database, land use records, General Land Office Survey Plats, and control cards. The Class I search revealed that no cultural or paleontological resources have been identified in the APE. Considering the low-impact nature of the proposed project, no additional archaeological investigative work will be conducted. However, if previously unknown cultural or paleontological materials are identified during project related activities, all work will cease until a professional assessment of such resources can be made.

#### **11. AESTHETICS:**

*Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature, or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify cumulative effects to aesthetics.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will have impacts on the aesthetics of the surrounding area.

**12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:**

*Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify cumulative effects to environmental resources.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will increase demands for the environmental resources of land, water, air or energy. The action alternative should increase the ease of wildlife migration, especially pronghorn antelope and should enhance sage grouse habitat as well.

**13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:**

*List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.*

No other known environmental assessments or documents pertinent to the area are currently being evaluated. The scoping process for this EA did not identify any proposed private, state or federal actions that would cause long term or cumulative impacts to the area.

**IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION**

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" if no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

**14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:**

*Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will pose any health or safety concerns for the surrounding area.

**15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:**

*Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will impact industrial, commercial and agricultural activities or production in the surrounding area.

**16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:**

*Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to the employment market.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will alter the quantity and distribution of labor and employment.

**17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:**

*Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will alter the local and state tax revenues.

**18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:**

*Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will increase the demand for government services in the surrounding area.

**19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:**

*List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.*

There are no locally adopted environmental plans and goals for the area. Beaverhead County does not have locally adopted zoning or management plans in place so neither of the proposed alternatives will affect environmental plans and goals.

**20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:**

*Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.*

The state lands where this proposal is located is currently accessible to the public from either BLM or Forest Service land. The improvement work will not alter that access under either of the proposed alternatives.

**21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:**

*Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify cumulative effects to population and housing.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will alter the distribution of population and housing in the surrounding area.

**22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:**

*Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will alter the social structures and mores in the surrounding area.

**23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:**

*How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?*

**Action Alternative:** No changes to the cultural uniqueness and diversity of the area would occur under this alternative. One of the unique assets of the area is its wildlife resources and this alternative will enhance the area for wildlife use allowing animals such as elk, deer, pronghorn and sage grouse to flourish into the future.

**No Action Alternative:** No changes to cultural uniqueness and diversity would be anticipated if this alternative is chosen.

**24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:**

*Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will increase revenue or economic circumstances for the common school trust, however the action alternative will increase the long-term viability, and sustainability of the landscape to sustain wildlife and there use of the state and private lands in the surrounding area.

**EA Checklist  
Prepared By:**

**Name:** Timothy Egan  
**Title:** Dillon Unit Manager

**Date:** August 7, 2019,

## V. FINDING

### 25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

**Action Alternative:** Allow Hat Creek Ranch to complete 9 miles of fence modification and reconstruction to make fences more wildlife friendly, allow 22 acres of conifer encroachment removal work to take place, complete mesic restoration work in 2 areas, and allow the ranch to mark 2 miles of fence with vinyl markers to prevent sage grouse collisions with fences near the Mud Creek lek.

### 26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

The proposed improvements will enhance wildlife movement across the landscape, will improve dilapidated fences, put fences on boundary lines, improve mesic areas and will remove conifer encroachment from two areas on state land. Marking fence boundaries with vinyl markers should reduce sage grouse collisions with the fence near the Mud Creek lek. The project will also improve forage production in the mesic areas for livestock and wildlife on state leased land.

### 27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

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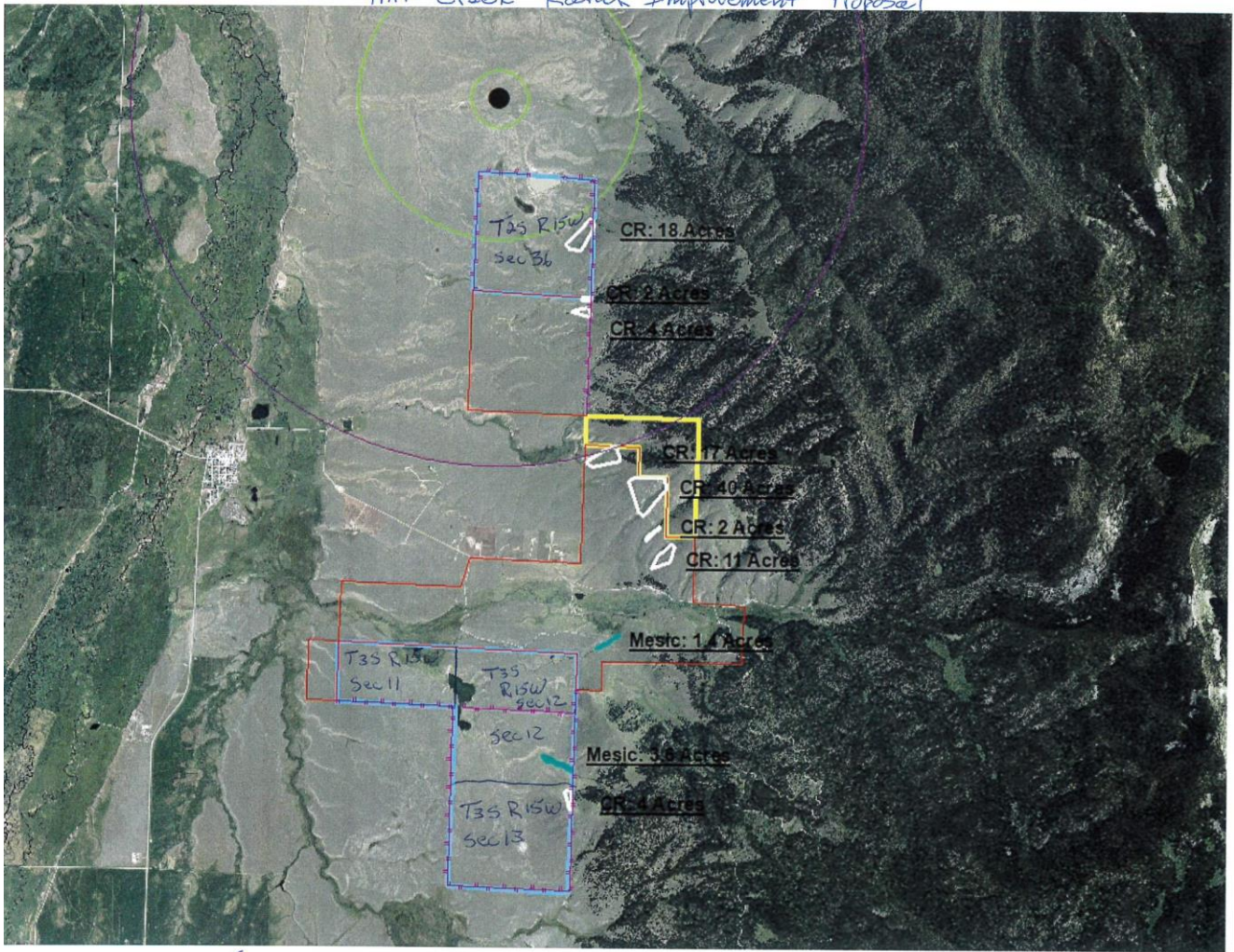
More Detailed EA

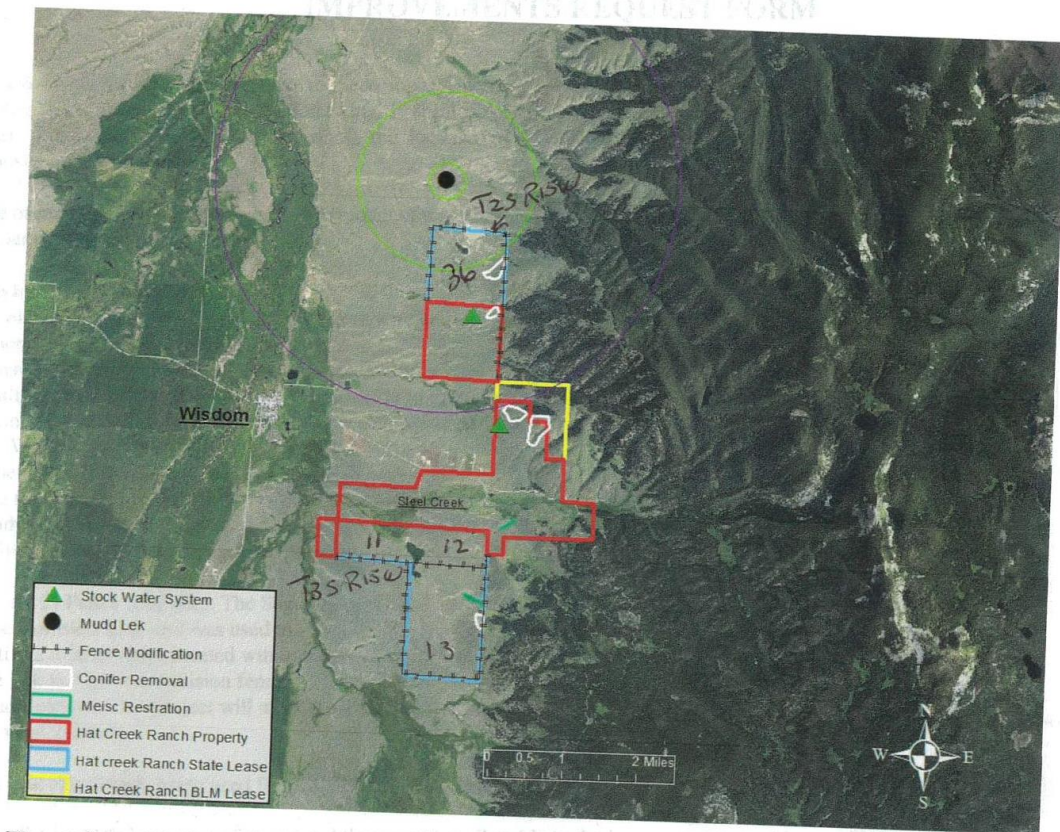
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No Further Analysis

<b>EA Checklist Approved By:</b>	<b>Name:</b> Andy Burgoyne <b>Title:</b> CLO Trust Land Program Manager
<b>Signature:</b> 	<b>Date:</b> 8/9/2019

HAT Creek Ranch Improvement Proposal





**Figure 1.** Location of HCR Wildlife Corridor and Habitat Enhancement Project 019 Conifer Removal Project (T2S, R15W Sections 24 and 25, T2S R14W Sec 31, T3S R14W Sec 6 and 7, and T3S R15W Sec 1, 11, 12, 13) Project is located approximately 3 miles northeast of Wisdom. Conservation actions to improve wildlife habitat and migration corridors include installing wildlife friendly fence, conifer removal in sage-steppe habitat, mesic habitat restoration and implementing a grazing management plan.